Ortega: A Philosophy of Technology Pioneer

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In this paper, I will present the philosophy of technology of the 20th century Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. As I will show, Ortega’s reflections upon technology (or technique, the term he preferred) are some of the very first we can find in the philosophical tradition, a pioneer’s role that he is rarely credited for. Nevertheless, Ortega’s thoughts on technology have much more interest than a mere historic value; something I will try to demonstrate by explaining two of his most important concepts regarding technology: the idea of “superfluous necessities” and the concept of “supranature”. These two powerful ideas, along with Ortega’s deep philosophical and anthropological system, will be defended as an underused paradigm from where we can try to understand the technologized world of today.

**Keywords:** Ortega y Gasset, Technology, Philosophy of Technology, Anthropology, Superfluous Necessities, Supra-nature.

1. Introduction

Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) has been recognized as one of the first philosophical figures to develop a complete and solid account related to technology (he preferred to use the word technique). Unfortunately, Ortega’s ideas have been rarely acknowledged due to Ortega’s little presence in the English-speaking philosophical tradition. Nevertheless, Ortega’s reflections upon technology are still today some of the most interesting and insightful we can find. Because of this,
introducing his background and thoughts about technology to the English-speaking community is warranted.

José Ortega y Gasset developed his career during the first half of the 20th century (1883–1955). After some years of study in Marburg (Germany) he returned to Spain and became the philosophical and intellectual guide of his generation. This was done through his teaching at the Universidad Central of Madrid, now known as the Complutense University of Madrid. In addition to teaching, he expressed his ideas through newspaper articles and other forms of public action. He is best known for his essays on modern-time life, among which the essay entitled *The Revolt of the Masses* stands out as his most influential work. However, his production is large and comprises many books and articles, many of which are devoted to modern technology. Ortega’s key work on this topic is *Meditation on Technics*, published in 1939 but already written in 1933. Nonetheless, many of his publications are directed more or less explicitly to the issue of technology, which arguably makes Ortega the first philosopher of technology.

Before presenting Ortega’s ideas on technology, I would like to briefly present the state of the art of the studies regarding his philosophy of technology. The consensus on this matter is revealing although somewhat paradoxical: almost all the scholars who have studied Ortega’s philosophy of technology agree on the enormous importance and interest of the subject, yet they also agree on the relatively scarce bibliography it has generated. Diéguez, one of the authors who has shown more interest in Ortega’s philosophy of technology, states that “it is still somewhat discouraging that the philosophy of technology elaborated by José Ortega y Gasset, fundamentally in his book *Meditation on Technics*, but also in other minor (and major) works, has received so little comparative recognition, even

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2 It is important to clarify that, although Ortega will mostly use the term “technique”, it is not inappropriate to understand “technology” as a synonym. Ortega sometimes uses technology as a more specific term; but in the context of Philosophy of Technology, and taking into account the time when the Spanish philosopher published his works, Ortega’s references to technique should be comprehended as equivalent to technology.
among some experts on his philosophy” (2014, 131). This widely shared opinion can also be seen in Mitcham, who spoke of *Meditation on Technics* as “one of his least appreciated works” (2000, 34). The majority of works on Ortega’s philosophy of technology are either the gloss of his *Meditation on Technics*, or a comparison with Heidegger’s take on technology.

Many philosophers have claimed the importance of Ortega’s reflections on technology. Echeverría defends that *Meditation on Technics* is “one of Ortega’s most important works, and undoubtedly one of the most important for today’s world” (2010, 190-191). Ellacuría ponders very adequately the value and meaning of *Meditation on Technics*, claiming that:

“Meditation on Technics, despite its short extension, is an important part of Ortega’s work. (...) Its importance and actuality are given by the subject itself, but, even more, by the way of treating it, of putting it in immediate and profound relationship with man as a whole, with human life as it is.” (1996, 415-416)

Even more enthusiastic are the words of González Quirós, who will come to say that “it could be said without fear of exaggerating that Ortega not only has a certain philosophy of technique, but that his entire philosophy is, precisely, a philosophy of technique” (2006, 15).

Dust’s opinion is also revealing when he states, commenting on Ihde’s attempts to metaphysically re-found Heideggerian philosophy of technique, that “I confess that I do not think it is necessary to reinvent the wheel. It is only necessary to discover the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset’s technique.” (1993, 133-134)

Many scholars have stressed the anticipation and novelty of Ortega’s reflections on technique, as well as its potential to think about our present. Quintanilla claims that

“Ortega is the first professional philosopher of stature who elaborates and publishes a philosophy of technology as such. It is also a consistent, suggestive and vigorous proposal, published in installments in the year 35 in the newspaper *La Nación of Buenos Aires* and as a book with the title *Meditation on Technics* in the year
1939, that is, significantly before the Second World War, which is the event that awakens the technological awareness of most European philosophers, notably Heidegger and the Critical Theory philosophers.” (2013, 2)

Many others have highlighted Ortega’s anticipation in the strictly philosophical treatment of the technique. For example, Mitcham, in his well-known introduction to the philosophy of technology *Thinking through technology: The path between engineering and philosophy*, states that “Ortega y Gasset is the first professional philosopher to deal with the question of technology” (1989, 58), a point on which Echeverría (2000, 22) and Diéguez (2013, 73-74) also agree. All these testimonies show how Ortega has received some recognition as a pioneer of philosophy of technology, even if not as widespread as it should be.

It is important to understand where does Ortega’s interest on technology come from. This anticipation derived from his early recognition that technology was completely determining the world of his time, and that it would continue to do so in a more pronouncedly way in the future. Years before *Meditation on Technics* he published his famous *The Revolt of the Masses* (1928). This decisive work constitutes Ortega’s first attempt to analyze his epoch and give an integral account of his time. And the characterization he gives of the early 20th century is one in which technology plays a huge and conflicting role as the core of the Western civilization. As Ortega himself said years later,

“my book, *The Revolt of the Masses* is inspired, among other things, by the dreadful suspicion that I sincerely felt at that time – back in 1927 and 1928, note it, the dates of prosperity – that the magnificent, the fabulous technique of today was in danger and it could very well happen that it slipped through our fingers and disappeared in much less time than you can imagine. (V 564)”

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3 For Ortega’s works I will give the reference of the tome of the *Complete Works* (Ortega y Gasset, José. *Obras completas*, Madrid: Taurus, 2004-2010) followed by the corresponding page number.
This might seem trivial right now, with technology being our daily bread, something we simply cannot live without. But we must understand that in Ortega’s time, this was nowhere as clear, and he was the first author to explicitly defend and argue this position. The phenomenon that serves as a title for the book, the revolt of the masses, is, in Ortega’s words, the “most important fact of our time” (IV 375). And this fact is directly related to technology: thanks to technological advances Europe witnessed a demographic explosion, which, sadly, was not accompanied by cultural and educational measures. As Ortega says, “piles and piles of men were projected into history at such an accelerated pace that it was not easy to saturate them with traditional culture” (IV, 402-403). This appreciation of technology’s crucial importance will only be reinforced through the years. And this is how we arrive to Ortega’s decisive work on technology, his Meditation on Technics, published in 1939, but already written in 1933 as a university course. In the following pages I will analyze this book and focus in two of its most original ideas: (1) the understanding of human needs as superfluous necessities, and (2) the concept of supra-nature.

2. Human Needs as Superfluous Necessities

Meditation on Technics begins by introducing the problem of human needs with an expository strategy very much of Ortega’s liking, beginning with a commentary about an apparently irrelevant matter and, little by little, revealing its tremendous implications. Ortega begins this text by developing a phenomenology of human needs, taking as examples two of the most pressing ones: the need for heat and the need for food. Ortega explains that, in cases of extreme cold, men feel like dying and consequently avoid the cold. The same goes for the natural need to eat, which leads them to seek food. These remarks, as Ortega explains, hide the true way in which these needs take place in human beings. Because in humans, Ortega argues, living is not a natural imposition but a freely assumed decision. The question “Why does man prefer to live rather than cease to be” is “one of the most justified and reasonable questions we can ask ourselves” (V, 554). To adduce instincts
in order to explain this reality is inappropriate, in Ortega’s opinion. This is because “instinct” is a dark term, but also because it is clear that “in humans instincts are almost erased” (V, 554).

Material and objective needs such as heat or food are subjectively mediated, that is, they depend on one last instance which is the subject who accepts them or not. In this way, natural needs become conditional needs for man:

“Therefore, it is not necessary to feed oneself, feeding is only necessary to live. Living is, therefore, the original need that all the others are mere consequences of. However, we have already indicated that humans live because they want to.” (V, 555)

Humans live because they decide to live. People always have the option of ending their lives or letting themselves die. This human capacity is the key to understanding Ortega’s approach, since man is “the only known entity that has the faculty – ontologically and metaphysically so strange, so paradoxical, so astonishing – of being able to annihilate itself and to cease to be there, in the world” (V, 555). To be able to commit suicide or to let oneself die is what always keeps life sustained, ultimately, by our own will. This, in turn, has decisive ethical-metaphysical consequences.

The key, according to Ortega, is that humans only decide to live when living conforms to their expectations of what they consider a good life. What this means is that humans are not determined to live (that is, to survive), but to live well; they do not want only to be in the world, but to be well, they seek well-being. This way we have reached one of the decisive points of Ortega’s reflection, not only for its philosophy of technique, but for the whole of his anthropology and philosophical system. Human life is precisely what humans create on the basis of biological life, but in a certain way, beyond it. Technology is what allows us to transcend animal needs and dedicate ourselves to superfluous human activities. As Ortega stated even more clearly, “human, technique and well-being are ultimately synonyms” (V, 562). The Orteguian meditation takes us directly to the core of the human condition. For what we have been calling human needs “are only in
function of well-being” (V, 562), and this well-being or ideal of a good life is not something given to humans, but something that changes geographically and historically. Having a good life in Europe in 2019 means having access to running water, internet and a nearby sushi restaurant. A good life in Ecuador during the 1400s, for example, would have meant something completely different. And by changing the well-being or ideal of human life, we change all aspects of their life, including the technical:

“... that which humans call life, good living or well-being is an ever-mobile term, unlimitedly variable. And since the repertoire of human needs is a function of it, they are no less variable, and since technique is the repertoire of acts provoked, aroused by and inspired by the system of these needs, it will also be a proteiform reality, in constant mutation.” (V, 563)

This simple passage goes against most approaches to philosophy of technique, particularly Marxism (Habermas 1997; Marcuse 1985). All our technology does not, properly speaking, satisfy any “need”. At least not any need in the sense we usually understand it, that is, as an insurmountable requirement that we absolutely have to fulfill in order to survive. The necessities human technology responds to are “superfluous necessities”, a paradoxical concept that precisely points to the fact that human needs are mostly not really peremptory. We talk about the need of running water, the need for an internet connection, the need of a good education or even the need of holidays. But none of these items are indispensable for survival. They are needed, as Ortega expresses, for having the kind of life a certain epoch understand as worthy living. The most interesting thing is how Ortega links this human condition with human’s detachment from those basic, survival related needs. Only because human, and only human among all animals, can to a certain extent distance himself from basic necessities, creating all the world of superfluous necessities we are referring to.

“Heating, agriculture and the manufacture of cars or automobiles are not, therefore, acts in which we satisfy our needs, but which
imply the opposite: a suspension of that primitive repertoire of doing things in which we directly try to satisfy them. (...) It is not so much intelligence that [the animal] lacks (...) as being capable to temporarily detach oneself from these vital urgencies, to detach oneself from them and remain open to engage in activities that, in themselves, are not the satisfaction of needs.” (V, 556)

As Quintanilla explains, closely following Ortega, “if hunger or cold are also fixed without technology by other living beings, it cannot be that hungaryness or coldness explain, without further ado, why there is technology” (Quintanilla 1999, 43). As a small precision, I believe we should rather say that hunger or cold do not by themselves explain the existence of technique, since technique in a broader sense is found in all animals (in all behavioral organisms).

Criticizing nineteenth-century philosophy, Ortega wrote that this epoch

“believed that hunger is ingenious. This line of thought did not realize that every vital urgency diminishes the plenitude of energies and does not leave room for the spirit to give its great elastic leaps. When reality urges us and squeezes us (...) we do not invent.” (VII, 827).

Ortega understands that humanity and its technical characteristic obliterate utilitarian logic and especially the guiding principle of adaptation:

“Technique is the opposite of the adaptation of the subject to the environment, since it is the adaptation of the environment to the subject. This would be enough to make us suspect that it is a movement in the opposite direction to all biological ones.” (V, 559)

Utilitarian thought and adaptationism have substantially evolved since Ortega’s time, incorporating, to some extent, the subtleties that he points out. In any case the main thesis stands: the idea that human technique does not seek to satisfy needs, but eliminates and annuls them, something that only becomes possible thanks to human technical capacity:
“... technique is not what man does to satisfy his needs. This expression is misleading and would also apply to the biological repertoire of animal acts. Technique is the reform of nature, of that nature that makes us needy and needy, reform in such a sense that needs are cancelled if possible because their satisfaction is no longer a problem.” (V, 558)

Ortega links this idea with another argument he puts forward. That when it comes to satisfying needs, the animal is perfect:

“This is why the animal is not technical: it is content with living and with what is objectively necessary for simple existence. From the point of view of simple existence animals are unrivalled and do not need technique.” (V, 562)

Said another way, animals do not have, in the proper sense of the word, needs. We cannot call them “needs”, for their animal life is nothing else but these needs, and therefore they do not even experience them as such (V, 557). Only a being like the human being, characterized by resisting his/her circumstance and distancing himself/herself from it, can experience hunger as a necessity (that is, as a nuisance and something to overcome). Ortega concluded that reflecting on human necessities

“unexpectedly reveals to us human’s most strange constitution; while all other beings coincide with his objective conditions – with nature or circumstance –, man does not coincide with it but is something alien and different from his circumstance.” (V, 557)

This understanding of human’s needs as superfluous necessities is extremely thought-provoking; therefore, it should be better known and

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4 As I pointed out previously, this comprehension of animals as technology-less has been overhauled in the last years (Reader et. al 2003; Hansell 2005). I do not believe this discredits Ortega’s position (he could not have had access to biology’s developments of the last decades), it only forces it to be more precise and subtle about this question.
discussed in the context of philosophy of technology. It is a quite unique conception, that almost no other philosopher has come close to envision.

After understanding the concept of “human needs as superfluous necessities,” we can examine Ortega’s concept of “supra-nature”, which has been conceptualized after him by other authors, like Stiegler’s exteriorization (2002) and Sloterdijk’s immunology (2014). However, as we will see, Ortega’s idea, besides from anticipating Stiegler’s and Sloterdijk’s proposals by more than 50 years, holds a lot of interest for its particular conceptualization of technology and its relationship with the human condition.

3. Supra-Nature as the Human Way of Inhabiting the World

Ortega clearly states in the introduction to the course What is technique? (1933), the course that will serve as basis for Meditation on Technics (1939), that “without technique, human would not exist and would never have existed. Nothing more and nothing less” (IX, 27). He continues to state that “today humans no longer live in nature but inhabit the supra-nature they have created, in a new day of genesis, technique” (IX, 28). The importance that Ortega gives to technique, and that correlatively must also be given to the supra-nature created by it, is due to the anthropological basis from which the Spanish philosopher thinks the technique. Thus, the key that triggers the technical action is precisely “the very strange constitution of the human being; while all other beings coincide with his objective conditions – with nature or circumstance – the human being does not coincide with it but is something foreign and different from his circumstance” (V, 557). This statement, that we already cited before to explain Ortega’s concept of superfluous necessities, becomes clearer here. Because the human being is, in a sense, detached from its circumstance (contrary to all other animals, according to Ortega), it must create a supra-nature, an artificial

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5 For a comparison see Alonso (2018).
nature upon the given nature, in order to make its life more pleasing, more similar to what humanity understands as a good life.

The point is that technique, as we saw in the previous section, “is not what humans do to satisfy their needs” (V, 558). This commonly accepted idea will be contradicted by Ortega. The mission of the technology goes far beyond the mere satisfaction of needs, because “technique is the reform of nature, of that nature that makes us needy, a reform in such a sense that the needs are annulled because their satisfaction is no longer a problem” (V, 558). Technique, in Ortega’s view, is not simply an alternative way to satisfy our needs, but a rebellion against circumstance. Said another way, technique “is the energetic reaction against the nature or circumstance that leads to create between that circumstance and humans a new nature placed on it, a supra-nature” (V, 558).

Therefore, supra-nature will be an artificial layer with which humans cover the original nature in order to dominate it and make their desires more feasible. In this way, this technical supra-nature replaces nature and becomes an authentic “habitat” from then on. There is no doubt that this idea is, as Diéguez (2013) has affirmed, one of the most important conceptual innovations from Ortega, and therefore it is convenient to analyze it in some detail.

To review, supra-nature is imposed on nature and transforms it according to human convenience. Supra-nature adapts nature to the human being, instead of the human being adapting itself to nature. Modern developments on biology and ecology have now a much more precise picture on the interaction between organisms and their environment, with very interesting and Orteguian-like proposals as niche construction theory (Sultan 2015; Alonso 2019). However, Ortega’s proposal is interesting for anticipating with decades of advance these ideas, but also for the peculiar understanding of technique the Spanish philosopher develops. As Ortega explained in *Meditation on Technics*,

“... we can define technique as the reform that human imposes on nature in view of the satisfaction of its needs. These, we have seen, were nature’s impositions on humanity. Humans respond by imposing a change on nature. Technique therefore is the energetic
reaction against nature or circumstance that creates, between nature and humans, a new nature, a supra-nature.” (V, 558)

Supra-nature is composed of all human creations, of everything artificial that man creates: from buildings and infrastructures to the smallest gadgets; without forgetting intellectual creations. Although it seems strange to understand this last aspect as supra-nature, Ortega himself pointed to it in his course *Man and people*, where he defends that the work of humanity is to humanize the world:

“Humanity humanizes the world, injects it, impregnates it with his own ideal substance and we can imagine that one day between days, there in the depths of time [that is, today], the terrible outer world will be so saturated with man, that our descendants may walk through it as we mentally walk through our intimacy today – we can imagine that the world, without ceasing to exist, will become something like a materialized soul.” (V, 537-538)

The strength of these expressions, and their surprising relationship with the world of today (a world increasingly covered with human supra-nature, with new technologies such as the Internet, a reality that fits surprisingly well into the Orteguian image of “materialized soul”), is noteworthy. In any case, it is important to note that the text does not distinguish, as far as this humanization of the world is concerned, between material technique and intellectual technique. In fact, Ortega’s expression “materialized soul” implies that one cannot distinguish between the two, and that the humanization of the world is both material and immaterial.

The train of thought that leads humanity to develop supra-nature is the following: humans, artificial organisms par excellence, gradually expand their artificiality beyond themselves, creating an artificial supra-nature that progressively gains more and more ground against nature. In this sense, it is also very significant and praiseworthy that Ortega was always aware of the danger of this supra-nature. Understanding that technology as indispensable and constitutive of the human being, does not prevent, but rather demands, us to be alert of its severity and the
risk of this supra-nature ruining and failing in its original function for sustaining human life. This recognition of the danger of this technical supra-nature can be seen in many of Ortega’s work like the final part of *Meditation on Technics; or The Revolt of the Masses*, where Ortega alerts of the fact that the mass-man is precisely the result of the great technical supra-nature raised by previous centuries.

Various authors and interpreters of Ortega have stressed the inherent dangers of supra-nature. Ellacuria comments that, because of the supra-nature that human erects, humanity gets “less and less contact with nature itself, which, even if it sometimes hinders human life, is also a treasure of incitements to build a truly human life, vigorous and not artificial” (Ellacuria 1996, 506). This supposes, as Echeverría points out, that “contemporary man feels more dominated by technology than by nature” (2000, 20), and that, although

> “Chancellor Bacon enunciated the project of dominating nature by means of science and technology, the current problem consists in dominating, or at least controlling, the supra-nature generated by technological actions” (Echeverría 2000, 20).

This must happen, as Martín points out, by transforming the logic of the passive, inertial heir to the logic of the creator (1999, 236), thus recognizing that all of human creation must be “re-creating itself day after day, ad infinitum” (1999, 348), thus preventing it from becoming a burden by incorporating it as a living organ of our organism.

The anthropological key to this idea, as I pointed out at the beginning, consists of Ortega’s understanding of the human being as a being who is in a circumstance, but is uncomfortable, strange, foreigner in it. However, it must be stressed that with these ideas Ortega never rejected technology in an absolute sense. The only possible way to live humanly is alongside technology. A technique which, in essence, is nothing other than the transformation of the circumstance, and which is therefore constitutively rooted in humanity: “A human without technique, that is, without reaction against the environment, is not a human” (V, 559).
Without technique we would not be able to overcome our radical inability to adapt to the environment.

4. Conclusion: Against Technophobia

As previously mentioned, Ortega did, in fact, accept the human technological condition. Contrasting to the technophobia seen in the works of Ellul (1960), Heidegger (1997) and Habermas (1997), Ortega was right from the start very cautious to approach technique in a strictly philosophical way, refraining from seeing it through the lens of a moral viewpoint. This meant recognizing that human life is simply impossible without technique, and not only that, but that the impulse to further enhance and increase technical capacity is also rooted ineradicably in the human condition.

In 1940 Ortega wrote a short and seemingly unimportant text titled Prologue to an Abbreviated Encyclopedic Dictionary. In this text Ortega affirms even more emphatically the inevitable technical character of humanity, criticizing anyone who vainly denies technique:

“For thirty years, anyone who pretends to be very spiritual has been speaking against contemporary machinism. As if the machine were something foreign to man!” (V, 637)

To clarify this point, Ortega states that:

“Anti-machinism is pure phraseology and pretentiousness. The human being is the machinist animal and there is nothing to be done about it. And it is good that it is what it is. What is needed is that he invents the new machines that the new and unresolved problems demand. And now we are faced with a new need: the machines are so many and so complicated that one machine is needed to handle the others. Or, in other words: it is necessary to awaken a new wisdom that teaches us to assimilate and practice all our oceanic wisdom. This – and not retreating from the machine to the coconut – is what the altitude of the times demands.” (V, 637)
The solution, Ortega tells us, is not to abandon machines, but to create new and better machines; machines that adjust to human life and not overflow it, technologies, therefore, that simplify our dealings with the machines themselves:

“It is urgent now to propose a second view and enact a more fruitful reaction to the effective and justified cultural anguish. This reaction would imply three new tasks.” (V, 638)

Tasks that Ortega enumerates: 1º To prune all that is dead; 2º To find a universal and synthetic knowledge that fights against specialism; and, above all,

“3º A third simplifying task is needed that consists in relieving as much as possible the personal mental effort in managing our human cultural treasure, mechanizing from it as much as, without serious risk, is mechanizable. For example: we must free the memory so that it is relegated to what is necessary to actually have in it, and entrust the rest, which is also necessary, but not necessary in the memory, to book-machines.” (V, 638)

It is true that, in other passages, Ortega qualifies this pro-technical stance; but it is evident that his criticism of technology takes place in the broader context of a positive evaluation of it, or rather, of a recognition of the inevitably technical condition of the human being. As a closing text I precisely want to bring one late and very firm reaffirmation of human technical condition from Ortega:

“One of the clearest laws of universal history is the fact that human’s technical movements have continuously increased in number and intensity, that is, that human technical occupation – in this strict sense – has developed in an unquestionable progression; or, what is the same, the human being, in an increasing measure, is a technical being. And there is no concrete reason to believe that this will not continue to be the case indefinitely. As long as humans live, we have to consider technology as one of its essential
constitutive features, and we have to proclaim the following thesis: the human being is a technician." (VI, 812)

In sum, Ortega’s philosophy of technology, or technique as he preferred, is an interesting proposal that not only anticipated many later developments, but continues to be novel and thought-provoking. Through Ortega’s work, English speaking philosophers will have a new perspective to face some of the current problems of the omnipresent technology of our world. Incorporating Ortega and his literature into our present philosophical discourse is not only a pending debt, but will prove very valuable for this field.

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